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A Double Standoff in Geneva

U.S. Strategists Predicting No Breakthrough in Arms Negotiations

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Administration strategists are raising no prospect for any breakthrough in the double set of U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms control negotiations in Geneva before the Nov. 2 U.S. elections.

As specialists anticipated, early exchanges in Geneva have resulted in a standoff in the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START), which seek to limit intercontinental-range missiles, and in the talks on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF), to restrict weapons based in Europe.

"It is too soon to be talking about progress in either of these negotiations," a senior administration official said. Others suggest that it may be well into 1983 before the outlook becomes clear, a more realistic projection than some of the expectations raised when the negotiations began.

In the next few weeks U.S. policy makers will be working out strategy and tactics to explore the Soviet position at length and to elaborate on American demands for when both sets of talks resume in Geneva the first week of October.

Before then, George P. Shultz is expected to have his first encounter as secretary of state with veteran Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko.

Politically, the Reagan administration already has gained considerably from the negotiating process in Geneva, despite the lack of tangible negotiating results. By entering into the two negotiations the administration won relief from the uproar in Western Europe and at home over the absence of talks to curb the arms race while engaging in a major military buildup.

Advocates of a nuclear "freeze," who were narrowly defeated in Congress, now seek to rekindle that pressure by making the freeze an issue in the coming elections on the grounds that there is no hope for ending the arms race in the current bargaining in Geneva.

The administration's latest counterargument is that the Soviet Union has been obliged to appear responsive to demands for a reduction in nuclear force levels, even though Moscow has spurned the American approach.

In Geneva the Soviet Union has offered to reduce its strategic forces below any previous numbers: to 1,800 long-range missiles and bombers for each superpower. That figure is 20 percent under the ceilings set in the SALT II accord signed by the Carter administration but rejected by President Reagan.

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U.S. officials privately characterize the Soviet offer as "SALT 2½" or "SALT warmed over." The proposed ceilings of 1,800 compare with about 2,500 missiles and bombers in the Soviet arsenal, and about 2,050 for the United States. The Reagan administration formula, however, concentrates on deep cuts in Soviet land-based missiles, the most threatening weapons against the United States.

In the first phase of the American proposal each nation would be limited to 850 ballistic missiles, which could carry no more than 5,000 nuclear warheads, down one-third from current levels.

The Soviet approach, U.S. specialists say, "doesn't get to the heart of the matter for us," notably, severely reducing the numbers of nuclear warheads on each side, for each missile can carry up to 20 warheads. One official said, "It's the old adage: it's not the launchers that kill, it's the warheads that kill."

An 1,800 ceiling on Soviet strategic forces, one U.S. official said, "would accommodate the bulk of their forces, and phase out some older stuff, while leaving our Minutemen [land-based missiles] still vulnerable to attack." The Soviet Union, for its part, seeks to head off new American weapons, notably long-range cruise missiles, MX missiles and Trident submarines.

Both sides are still in the process of unveiling positions, and also refining them. The Reagan administration, and probably the Kremlin as well, U.S. officials say, has yet to make decisions on some elements of its own proposals to limit strategic forces in this set of negotiations, which began at the end of June and recessed Aug. 12.

The two nations similarly are nowhere near accord in negotiations, which began in December, 1981, to limit intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe, and have gone through two rounds. There is "a wide chasm" between opposing positions here, a Soviet commentator said recently.

In this bargaining, the United States offered what is known as a "zero-zero" proposal: to forgo the deployment next year of 572 Pershing II and cruise missiles in Western Europe if the Soviet Union would dismantle 600 intermediate-range missiles capable of hitting Western Europe.

The Soviet Union counterproposed limiting each side to 300 missiles. But the Soviet Union would count in that ceiling 162 British and French missiles, a proposal the United States rejects.

The Soviet Union also has called publicly for counting American planes based in Europe with capacity to deliver atomic bombs on Soviet territory. U.S. officials say this could amount to zero Pershings and cruise missiles, with no restraint on the newest Soviet intermediate missile, the SS20.

On this issue, one American official said, "When the Soviets are persuaded that we are prepared to deploy—in the absence of an agreement—we will be able to see a little more of their bottom line."

Critical choices in both sets of negotiations, therefore, are far in the future, and highly dependent on intervening events that could affect basic relations between the two superpowers.